

***Derailing Democracy?* Attempted US Intervention into El Salvador's Presidential Elections**

A Report by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES),
January 2019

Summary: During El Salvador's Civil War (1980-1992), the United States government provided over \$3.6 billion in military and economic aid¹ to support the government of El Salvador, which the United Nations Truth Commission² found responsible for committing the vast majority of human rights atrocities during the armed conflict. Though the legacy of state repression still deeply affects society, the Salvadoran people have advanced in their struggle to create a society based on democracy, justice and rule of law.

However, various representatives of the U.S. government have continued to violate the Salvadoran people's right to democracy and national sovereignty by intervening in the country's presidential elections in order to scare the population out of voting for the leftist party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Representatives of various U.S. administrations, Members of Congress and other public figures who have attempted to intimidate voters have typically done so by exploiting the deep economic and social ties between the two countries. The U.S. is El Salvador's biggest trading partner and, since 2001, El Salvador has used the U.S. dollar as its national currency. More significantly, approximately 2.5 million Salvadorans live in the United States³, nearly thirty percent of the total population, and remittances from the U.S. make up the country's single greatest source of GDP, approximately 18% in 2017⁴.

In the lead-up to the 2004 and 2009 elections, several Members of Congress threatened to retaliate against Salvadoran immigrants and their families in El Salvador in the event of an FMLN victory. Others implied that diplomatic relationship between the U.S and El Salvador would be in jeopardy.

In the months leading up to El Salvador's presidential elections scheduled for February 3, 2019, the threat of severing the U.S.-El Salvador relationship has resurfaced. In response to the Central American migration, El Salvador's decision to normalize relations with China and other issues, representatives of the Trump Administration and several Members of Congress have repeatedly threatened to cut aid and to "re-evaluate" the relationship between the two countries.

Statements, such as those detailed below, are reported in El Salvador's major newspapers and TV networks as if they were a factual reflection of U.S. policy. In a pre-elections context, such allegations must be understood not only as political fodder for the right-wing parties in El Salvador, namely the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), but as a violation of the Salvadoran people's right to freely elect a president of their choosing without fear of U.S. retaliation.

Therefore it is essential to the exercise of democracy in El Salvador that Members of Congress and Representatives of the U.S. Government take a clear, public position of neutrality in advance of El Salvador's elections.

¹ U.S. General Accounting Office, Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives: *EL SALVADOR: Accountability for U.S. Military and Economic Aid* (September 1990)

² *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador* (March 1993)

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of El Salvador

⁴ Central Reserve Bank, El Salvador

Attempted Intervention into El Salvador's 2004 Presidential Elections:

Roger Noriega, Assistant Secretary of Western Hemispheric Affairs for the U.S. State Department stated: "It is fair to note that the FMLN's campaign has emphasized its differences with [the United States] regarding issues such as the [CAFTA] free trade agreement and other matter and we know about the history of this political movement. **Therefore, it is fair for Salvadorans to judge what type of relations this political movement could maintain with us.**" (February 2, 2004, US Embassy in San Salvador)

Otto Reich, President Bush's Special Envoy for Latin America stated that he: "is worried about the **impact that an FMLN victory would have for commercial, economic and immigration relations with the United States.**" (March 13, 2004, media teleconference conducted from ARENA party offices)

Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) threatened to revise U.S. policy toward Salvadoran immigrants, and specifically their **ability to send money home to relatives** in El Salvador, should the FMLN win the election

Rep. Dan Burton (R-IN) called for the **termination of the Temporary Protective Status program (TPS)**, which enables some 300,000 Salvadoran immigrants to remain in the United States and send remittances to their families, in the case of an FMLN victory in the 2004 election

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) warned that the election of the FMLN would result in a dramatic deterioration of the relationship between the US and El Salvador, and "**reconsideration**" of the **immigration status of Salvadorans living in the United States**

Attempted Intervention into El Salvador's 2009 Presidential Elections:

Comments made on the House floor, March 11, 2009 (three days before the election)

Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ) stated, "Should the pro-terrorist FMLN party replace the current government in El Salvador, the United States, in the interests of national security, would be **required to reevaluate our policy toward El Salvador**, including cash remittance and immigration policies to compensate for the fact there will no longer be a reliable counterpart in the Salvadoran government."

Rep. Dan Burton (R-IN) stated, "Those monies that are coming from here to there I am confident will be cut, and **I hope the people of El Salvador are aware of that because it will have a tremendous impact on individuals and their economy.**"

Rep. Connie Mack (R-FL) stated, "El Salvador receives nearly \$4 billion a year in remittances—almost 20% of its annual gross domestic product—from several million Salvadorans living in the United States. As we look to the future, we must weigh the **potential ramifications of this election and its impact on our relations**, more importantly, the longstanding and open policies related to TPS and the flow of remittances."

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (D-CA) stated, "It must be emphasized that the United States has very good relations with the current government of El Salvador, led by the party ARENA. ... If the FMLN enters the government of El Salvador following the presidential elections scheduled for March 2009, it will mean a **radical termination of the conditions** that underlie the unrestricted movement of billions of dollars a year and that permitted the granting of TPS in the first place and its continued renewal."

Subsequent media headlines:

Prepared by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. For more information: www.cispes.org

“Senator calls for restrictions on remittances if the FMLN wins,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 11, 2009.

“Remittances and TPS in danger if the FMLN wins – Antiterrorist laws in the US would oblige Congress to demand harsh measures against a state with terrorist links,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 12, 2009.

“Election in El Salvador puts US Congress on alert,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 12, 2009.

Attempted Intervention into El Salvador’s 2014 Presidential Elections

In October 2013, Representatives Matt Salmon (R-AZ) and Albio Sires (D-NJ), President and Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, sent a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry implying ties between drug trafficking organizations in Central America and the FMLN. Mr. Salmon and Mr. Sires warned of unnamed drug traffickers who could try to “sway the elections.” The Representatives accused long-time FMLN legislator and 2014 Presidential candidate Salvador Sánchez Cerén of having “dubious democratic credentials” and calling for “heightened security” by the United States regarding the elections.

This narrative was echoed closely in a January 3, 2014 *Washington Post* op-ed by Elliot Abrams, former assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs in the Reagan administration who pled guilty to withholding information from Congress in 1993.

Increasing U.S. Hostility Casts Shadow over 2019 Presidential Elections

While the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador frequently clashed with the governing FMLN party at various points during the Obama administration, the Trump Administration has repeatedly called into question the binational relationship between the United States and El Salvador. Given the high percentage of Salvadoran families with at least one member living in the United States, and the El Salvador’s deep economic ties to the United States, such threats can be understood as attempts to undermine the current FMLN administration in the eyes of the public. Comments from U.S. officials, whether factual or not, are seized upon by major conservative media outlets and by right-wing opposition parties as fodder for their campaign.

The Trump Administration’s repeated threats to unilaterally cut funding to El Salvador, along with Honduras and Guatemala, for ostensibly failing to stem the tide of migration, are playing out in similar ways.

On October 22, 2018, President Trump tweeted, “Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were not able to do the job of stopping people from leaving their country and coming illegally to the U.S. **We will now begin cutting off, or substantially reducing, the massive foreign aid routinely given to them.**”

More explicitly, the U.S. has, on multiple occasions, threatened retaliatory action towards the country in response to the government of El Salvador’s decision in August 2018 to normalize relations with China.

Immediately following the announcement, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Jean Manes tweeted, “The US is analyzing the decision of #ElSalvador. It is worrisome for many reasons, including breaking a relationship of more than 80 years with #Taiwan. **Without a doubt, this will impact our relationship with the government.** We continue supporting the Salvadoran people.”

The White House quickly echoed the Ambassador's sentiments, issuing the following press statement: "The El Salvadoran [*sic*] government's receptiveness to China's apparent interference in the domestic politics of a Western Hemisphere country is of grave concern to the United States, and **will result in a reevaluation of our relationship with El Salvador.**" According to Reuters, a spokesperson for the State Department stated that "We **are reviewing our relationship with El Salvador** following this decision."

Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) co-sponsored a budget amendment that sought to restrict U.S. funding to El Salvador in response to this decision. In the press release, Marco Rubio lamented, "This is a grave mistake that harms relations with the U.S."

Rubio later tweeted, "The U.S. response to #Panama & #DominicanRepublic switching from #Taiwan to #China is NOT the way we will react if #ElSalvador does the same. If they do **this I will have no choice but to immediately begin work to end their funding & remove them from #AllianceForProsperity plan.**"

Subsequent media headlines:

"White House Expresses 'Grave Concerns' about China El Salvador Relationship, Affirms that it will affect all of America," *La Prensa Gráfica*, August 24, 2018

"Soon US Aid will be Lost because of China decision, Warns Senator," *La Prensa Gráfica*, August 30, 2018

"Alliance for Prosperity at Risk? This is what El Salvador has received in past four years," *La Prensa Gráfica*, September 10, 2018

"US considers restricting visas and aid to El Salvador due to relationship with China," *La Prensa Gráfica*, September 30, 2018

In January 2019, McClatchy reported that the Trump Administration is seeking to restrict trade preferences under the Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) for El Salvador, along with Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. The news prompted headlines in El Salvador's major conservative dailies, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy*, such as "US wants to kick El Salvador out of CAFTA for having relations with China." Thus far the U.S. Embassy has not commented on these reports.

In the weeks leading up to El Salvador's presidential elections, threats of aggressive action towards the El Salvador can be interpreted as U.S. attempts to undermine popular support for the governing party.

Recommendations:

- The State Department and its representatives should refrain from making speculative comments about the future of U.S. policy in El Salvador in the pre-elections context.
- The State Department should refrain from opining about any candidates or parties running in the election.
- The State Department should take a public position of neutrality and make clear to the Salvadoran people and to all institutions in the country that the relationship between El Salvador and the United States is not in jeopardy and that the United States will respect the outcome of a free and fair election.